



# The Infallibility of the Ecumenical Councils vs The Fallible Hierarchy: Whom Do We Follow?

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Recently an Orthodox Hierarchy presented the online Orthodox Christian world with a highly problematic catechetical lecture containing multiple statements that were rife with historical inaccuracies, falsifications, and the teachings of a foreign and heretical ecclesiology based on the innovative ecclesiology developed during Vatican II. These catechetical talks being given are seemingly in response to the recent book published by Uncut Mountain Press — our monumental volume on the reception of converts to Holy Orthodoxy entitled, *On the Reception of the Heterodox into the Orthodox Church: The Patristic Consensus and Criteria*.



In these lectures posted to a parish YouTube channel, this hierarch is teaching those inquirers, catechumens, laymen, and clergy present that the Ecumenical Councils of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, are not infallible according to the doctrine of the Orthodox Church. In this lecture he is quoted saying:

This is very important. We don't have an external concrete criterion of authority, we don't have an infallible Bible, we don't have an infallible Pope, and we don't have infallible Ecumenical Councils, those are all human [1].

The supporters of this hierarch who have no intimate first-hand knowledge or experience of what this hierarch teaches outside of YouTube have been trying to actively minimize these statement as misinterpreted or not what he actually meant. As for those who do have first-hand knowledge of this hierarch and his problematic teachings, these statements are nothing new and are in fact the well-known personal beliefs which he teaches from both the ambo and in public lectures. To establish a clear context it should be noted that he is not referring to those many false councils which have existed in Church History, such as the 2016 false council in Crete, but is explicitly referring to the canonical Ecumenical Councils as fallible. In a previous lecture from 2020 we can see the same statement from this bishop in which he states:

We have nothing that's infallible in the Orthodox Church, save for the Church herself [...] we don't have an infallible pope, we don't have an infallible Bible, we don't have, in fact, infallible Ecumenical Councils, because if you read through the councils each one set up the problems for the next one [2].

However, going even further back into the teachings of this hierarch (2018) we can see that he teaches that the councils are fallible, yet infallible, and that the councils decisions are correct, yet open to correction by a future Ecumenical Council. In essence he is stating that the first decisions have the possibility to be incorrect, making them again fallible, and also maintaining that it was the Ecumenical Councils' themselves that set up future theological problems within the Church, rather than the heretics themselves establishing additional theological problems. In this class he states:



The 1st and 2nd Ecumenical Council was the beginning of the definite setting of and the definition of terms and each council sets not only the terms but they set the problems that have to be resolved at the next council. There's an aspect in which you can say the teaching of the council's is infallible. usually we don't use such categories in the Orthodox Church and we absolutely affirm those teachings as correct but they are also subject to correction by the next council. So if you remember we read through the original Nicene Creed which sounds a lot like but it was still very different than the Nicene Creed that we all know, that's because Second [Ecumenical Council] had to correct and add to the creed of the 1st [Ecumenical] Council [3].

Firstly, we must define what infallibility actually means. Infallibility according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* means to be: "Without fail or liability to prove false; most certainly, indubitably" and "Without liability to err or be mistaken; unerringly" [4]. So essentially what this hierarch is saying is that, even though the Church Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils were under the guidance and divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that these Councils in their canons and dogmatic decrees can be wrong and could have produced doctrines which are not in and of themselves Orthodox. This hierarch stating that the Ecumenical Councils are fallible is in actuality standing in judgment of the Holy Fathers who were present at these nine Ecumenical Councils and is calling them into question; which is something that has never really been done in the history of the Church.



18th Century Icon of Pentecost

Is this what the Orthodox Church teaches concerning the nine Holy Ecumenical Councils? That they are, in fact, fallible councils that could have erred in their canons and decrees? Or is this hierarch who is teaching these things, in fact, the one who is fallible and publicly teaching against the *consensus patrum* of the Orthodox Church on this doctrine? In order to determine this we will look into the history of the Church, the scriptures, the councils, the writings of the Holy Saints and Elders, and liturgical texts to see what has really been said about the infallibility and divine inspiration of the Holy Ecumenical Councils. "In the year 48, the Apostolic Council, the first council in the Church's history and which is described in the Acts of the Apostles, was held in Jerusalem. At this Council it was decided that non-Jewish Christians were not required to be circumcised and it also determined which parts of the Mosaic Law they should conform to, issues that had caused great turmoil in the Church in its early days. The Council's decision begins with the phrase *for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* (Acts 15:28), and it is this apostolic phrase which epitomizes the institution of synodical ecclesiastical governance" [5]. This chapter from the Book of Acts reads:

And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.

And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:

That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas and Silas, chief men among the brethren: And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.

Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well [6].

As we can see from the scriptures the Holy Apostles and the Church gathered together to determine if Christians were still required to follow the Mosaic Law. This decision was not made solely by the will of men, but of those Apostles and God-bearing elders who were consecrated to the office and with authority, divine guidance, and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to judge without error. The apostles and elders in conciliar fashion through the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit said, "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things." Would the Holy Spirit allow this council to be left open to the possibility of doctrinal error and the preaching of another gospel? Of course not.



Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council

From the time of the scriptures to the patristic period the consensus of the Church has never been of the belief that these true Church councils could be anything but infallible. As an example of this we can see that in the 3rd century, the Church Historian, Socrates Scholasticus, in his famous work *Historia Ecclesiastica* writes about the condemnation of specific heretics at a God inspired council:

In short he terms the thought of all those who were assembled there the thought of God, and does not doubt that the unanimity of so many eminent bishops was effected by the Holy Spirit. Sabinus, however, the chief of the heresy of the Macedonians, willfully rejects these authorities, and calls those who were convened there ignorant and illiterate persons; nay, he almost accuses Eusebius of Cæsarea himself of ignorance: nor does he reflect, that even if those who constituted that synod had been laymen, yet as being illuminated by God, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, they were utterly unable to err from the truth [7].

In addition to the scriptures and ancient historical commentaries from the 3rd century, we also have various saints from throughout the history of the Church who have in their writings discussed the divine inspiration of these councils. Saint Isidore of Pelusium, a holy ascetic from the deserts of ancient Egypt in the 5th century, in Letter 99 to Eudaemonius the Presbyter about the first Ecumenical Council in Nicaea writes:

Since, as you have written, some among men do not even consider God to exist, who have all succumbed to impiety; others, indeed, acknowledge His existence, but claim He does not exercise any providence; some believe that He is indeed endowed with providence, but only over celestial matters; yet others assert that He oversees terrestrial matters, but not all, only those of kings and rulers; some, however, attribute His providence to all things (for they even attribute it to ants), yet they do not wish to adore the consubstantial Trinity. And some believe that everything is carried by blind and random chance, while others contend that all things happen by fate; and some believe that only through Moses did God give forth the law, while others claim an opposing power; and some believe that the Word, begotten of God, did not come into flesh; while others believe that He did come, but only in appearance and in the manner of a vision. And some have handed down a confusion, a mingling, and an abolition of natures; while others affirm that He was in a man; some deem Him lesser than the Father; while others have defined Him as a creation; and some do not confess the divine Spirit as God, but rather term it ministerial and sanctifying. Those who are afflicted by illness [heresy] should not follow opinions; rather, they should draw demonstrations from the judgment of a sacred court of men, and adhere to the holy synod held at Nicaea, neither adding to it nor taking away from it. *For it, being divinely inspired, handed down the truth of doctrines* [8].

Saint Isidore of Pelusium in his letter is describing various heresies that had existed at the time of his writings and is explaining to this priest that they should not adhere to the mere opinions of various men but instead follow the sacred synod, which was divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit and handed down the truth of Orthodox doctrine. As can be extrapolated from the context of this desert father's letter, he in no way believed that the divinely inspired first Ecumenical Council was fallible and open to the possibility of doctrinal error. For how can the Holy Spirit who divinely inspired these councils leave Christ's body, the Church, which gathered in council, open to the possibility of doctrinal error when it handed down the Orthodox faith?

In a similar manner, Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite in his commentaries in the Orthodox *Rudder* concerning the Holy Ecumenical Councils says:

So every Ecumenical Council that possesses these characteristic features is in fact the Holy and Catholic Church itself in which in the Symbol of Faith we profess to believe [...] being infallible and sinless. For the Church, which the Ecumenical Council takes the place of as its personal representative, is a pillar and framework of the truth, according to St. Paul (1 Tim. 3:15); accordingly, whatever seems right to Ecumenical Councils seems right also to the Holy Spirit of Truth: for, it says, He shall teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said unto you (John 14:26) [9].

As we can see, the teaching concerning the infallibility of the Holy Ecumenical Councils as a true doctrine of the Church is becoming more clear and that to state otherwise is coming from a place of doctrinal renovationism. Another example where a Church Father has taught that the Ecumenical Councils are infallible is in a homily of the blessed and incorrupt First-Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, Metropolitan Philaret (Voznesensky). During a homily on the Ecumenical Councils, Blessed Metropolitan Philaret instructs his flock saying:

Everyone needs to remember that in the life of the Church, Ecumenical Councils are the primary, that is to say, source of ecclesiastical, spiritual, and legislative power. The decrees of Ecumenical Councils express one or another ecclesiastical truth, revealed to people by the grace of the Holy Spirit. And therefore, what the Ecumenical Councils determine is the indisputable and supreme spiritual authority and law for every faithful son and daughter of the Church. Let's remember this, dearly beloved! [...] There are issues about which the Ecumenical Councils have claimed their indisputable definitions, and there can be no room in our mind and self-will here. But there should only be unconditional obedience to the voice of the Church [10].



The universal recognition of the Holy Ecumenical Councils being infallible can also be seen in the 1895 Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate when writing a letter to the schismatic and heretical Pope of Rome on the subject of "reunification." In this text, the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in writing to the Pope states concerning the Ecumenical Councils that, "having recourse to the fathers and the Ecumenical Councils of the Church of the first nine centuries, we are fully persuaded that the Bishop of Rome was never considered as the supreme authority and infallible head of the Church, and that every bishop is head and president of his own particular Church, *subject only to the synodical ordinances and decisions of the Church universal as being alone infallible*, the Bishop of Rome being in no wise excepted from this rule, as Church history shows" [11]. Not only is the Ecumenical Patriarchal Synod refuting Latin Papism (something much different from today) but they are speaking the truth of the universal doctrine of the Church concerning the infallibility of the Ecumenical Councils.

Another place that we want to turn our attention to is the liturgical texts of the Church and what they have to say concerning this subject. In the Orthodox Church, we believe what we pray and pray what we believe (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). This means that within the texts of the services we can read Orthodox Christian dogmatic truths. In the *Commemoration of the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council - Troparion & Kontakion* we read:

Troparion — Tone 8

You are most glorious, O Christ our God, / You have established the Fathers as lights upon the earth, / and through them, You have guided all of us to the true Faith! / O greatly compassionate one, glory to You.

Kontakion — Tone 8

The preaching of the Apostles and the dogmas of the Fathers have confirmed one faith for the Church; / and She, clad in the garment of truth woven from heavenly theology, / teaches aright and glorifies the great mystery of piety [12].

In the *Fathers of the First Six Councils - Troparion & Kontakion* we find similar language. These liturgical texts read:

Troparion — Tone 8

You are most glorious, O Christ our God, / You have established the Fathers as lights upon the earth, / and through them, You have guided all of us to the true Faith! / O greatly compassionate one, glory to You.

### Kontakion — Tone 8

The preaching of the Apostles and the dogmas of the Fathers have confirmed one faith for the Church; / and She, clad in the garment of truth woven from heavenly theology, / teaches aright and glorifies the great mystery of piety [13].

Now these liturgical texts concerning the Ecumenical Councils do not speak directly about the infallibility of the Ecumenical Councils verbatim. However, when we read these within the full context of the Church's other texts is there any doubt that the consensus of the Church is that they are in fact infallible when we read such verses as "You have guided all of us to the true Faith!"



Icon of the Eighth Ecumenical Council

Another view to look at this subject through is from those in theological academia. In general, many of those who adhere to revisionist theology hold so-called academic theologians in higher esteem than that of the Saints, Church Fathers, Holy Elders and even Ecumenical Councils. Since many people appeal to the writings of those within academia, we should of course take a cursory examination of what some of the most notable academics have said concerning this subject from both the modernist and traditionalist world-views. Beginning with a notable academic theologian, Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), in his classic work from the 1960s, *The Orthodox Church*, writes concerning the infallibility of the Church and Ecumenical Councils: "*The Church is infallible*. This again follows from the indissoluble unity between God and His Church. Christ and the Holy Spirit cannot err, and since the Church is Christ's body, since it is a continued Pentecost, it is therefore infallible. It is 'the pillar and the ground of truth' (I Timothy iii, 15). 'When he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth' (John xvi, 13). So Christ promised at the Last Supper; and Orthodoxy believes that Christ's promise cannot fail. In the words of Dositheus: 'We believe the Catholic Church to be taught by the Holy Spirit... and therefore we both believe and profess as true and undoubtedly certain, that it is impossible for the Catholic Church to err, or to be at all deceived, or ever to choose falsehood instead of truth.' The Church's infallibility is expressed chiefly through the Ecumenical Councils" [14].

As we can see Metropolitan Kallistos understands and teaches through this classic Orthodox text that the Church and therefore the Ecumenical Councils are infallible. Immediately following that assertion, he goes on to say "A bishop is appointed by God to guide and to rule the flock committed to his charge... At his consecration a bishop receives a special gift or *charisma* from the Holy Spirit, in virtue of which he acts as a teacher of the faith.... But although the bishop has a special *charisma*, it is always possible that he may fall into error and give false teaching: here as elsewhere the principle of synergy applies and the divine element does not expel the human. The bishop remains a man, and as such he may make mistakes. The Church is infallible, but there is no such thing as personal infallibility." [15] While the Ecumenical Councils are infallible, the individual bishops are not.

Turning toward the Russian Orthodox Church and in the writings of Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), a very well-known academic scholar, who adheres to the more modernist and ecumenist world-view and is very much endorsed by the hierarch who teaches that the Ecumenical Councils are fallible, we read from his text in *Orthodox Christianity, Volume II: Doctrine and Teaching of the Orthodox Church* that even the liturgical texts of the Church are infallible concerning dogmatic theology. Metropolitan Hilarion writes concerning the multiple sources of dogmatic infallibility that:

Apart from the Holy Writings of the Old and New Testaments, the content of Tradition in the Orthodox Church includes, other written sources, among which are the texts of the divine services, the orders of the Sacraments, the resolutions of the ecumenical and local councils, the works of the Fathers and readings of the ancient Church. What authority do these texts have for the Orthodox Christian? This absolute and indisputable authority is used in the dogmatic decisions of the ecumenical councils, proceeding from what the Church has received. [...] The liturgical Tradition of the Church is certainly used as an absolute authority. In their dogmatic irreproachability, the texts of the divine services of the Orthodox Church serve as do Holy Scripture and the faithful decrees of the councils. These texts are not only works issued by theologians and poets, but are a part of the liturgical experience of many generations of Christians. In the Orthodox Church, the authority of the texts of the divine services is founded on reception, the process these texts underwent over many centuries, when they were read and sung everywhere in every Orthodox temple. [...] These texts became pure and irreproachable theology, covered in the poetic forms of church hymns. That is why the Church acknowledged these texts of the divine services among the ranks of the “Rules of Faith,” in the ranks of the infallible dogmatic sources [16].

Lastly, another work that must be mentioned is that of *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* by Father Michael Pomazansky and Father Seraphim (Rose). This work which is used as the dogmatics text book for all seminarians at Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, New York, says in its chapter concerning the Ecumenical Councils that:

It is clear that the dogmas are not founded on the rational conceptions of separate individuals, even though these might be Fathers and teachers of the Church, but rather on the teachings of Sacred Scripture and on the Apostolic Sacred tradition. The truths of the faith which are contained in the Sacred Scripture and the Apostolic Sacred Tradition give the fullness of the teaching of faith which was called by the ancient Fathers of the Church the “catholic faith,” the “catholic teaching” of the Church. The truths of Scripture and Tradition [i.e. Ecumenical Councils], harmoniously fused together into a single whole, define the “catholic consciousness” of the Church, a consciousness that is guided by the Holy Spirit. [...] The Orthodox Church of Christ is the Body of Christ, a spiritual organism whose Head is Christ. It has a single spirit, a single common faith, a single and common catholic consciousness, guided by the Holy Spirit; and its reasonings are based on the concrete, definite foundation of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Apostolic Tradition.

This catholic consciousness is always with the Church, but, in a more definite fashion, this consciousness is express in the Ecumenical Councils of the Church. [...] The decrees of the councils concerning faith express the harmony of Sacred Scripture and the catholic Tradition of the Church. For this reason these decrees became themselves, in their turn, an authentic, inviolable, authoritative, Ecumenical and Sacred Tradition of the Church, founded upon the facts of Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition. [...] The Church is holy likewise through its pure, *infallible teaching of faith*: the Church of the living God is, according to the word of God, the pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim. 3:15). The Patriarchs of the Eastern Churches, concerning the infallibility of the Church in its teachings, express themselves thus: "In saying that the teaching of the Church is infallible, we do not affirm anything else than this, that it is unchanging, that it is the same as was given to it in the beginning as the teaching of God" [17].

As we have now read "the supreme authority in matters of faith, morals, and ecclesiastical order in the Orthodox Church is the Ecumenical Council, and its decisions are binding for the entire Church. More specifically, because the truth about God is revealed by the Holy Spirit, the decisions on questions of dogma made by the Council are accepted as divinely inspired" [18]. The Church has made abundantly clear through the scriptures, saints, the holy and God-bearing Fathers, liturgical texts and learned academics that it is a matter of factual consensus that the Holy Ecumenical Councils have been deemed infallible and in the words of the Holy Elder, the Blessed Philotheos (Zervakos), "whoever does not accept that the Holy Fathers were led by the Holy Spirit, is an evil believer and heretic" [19].

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